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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: IRAQI MINISTRIES AGREE -- AD REF -- ON
MESSAGE FOR PUBLIC SERVICE CAMPAIGN ON FUEL PRICE
HIKES

¶1. (SBU) Embassy Media Development Officer attended a February 6 meeting convened by Mohammed al-Asadi, director of the Government Communications Directorate (GCD), to continue discussions of a public "message" for government reductions in fuel subsidies. (Note: Messages would eventually encompass overall economic reform, but initially we are focusing on fuel subsidies, the hot-button political issue at this time.) The ministries of electricity (MOE), oil (MOO), finance (MOF), labor and social affairs (MoLSA), transportation (MOT), and Planning (MOP) were represented. Phil Malone, DFID advisor to the GCD, and Olga Zatepilina, International Republican Institute Country Director, and Samir Zedan, USAID Public Affairs Advisor, also attended. Iraqi participants repeatedly veered off course to speculate what kinds of reforms/new benefits might accompany the price hikes, i.e., what might be the best carrot to bring people along. We reminded them that such "deliverables" might have to await phase two of the campaign: right now the government must explain the need for general reforms.

¶2. (SBU) After much hesitation, participants agreed that the fuel price message should be linked to the message on MoLSA's expanded social safety net, but MoLSA could not provide firm assurance that payments would be available to coincide with the price hikes. The most the government could do at this point (for the initial public campaign) was inform citizens they could register for the expanded safety net program at their provincial councils, and explain that the program would soon serve 1 million families. (Comment: In a separate meeting, MoLSA officials had said that 1 million families should be covered in March. USAID sources indicate that June would be a more realistic timeframe.) They also agreed to include at least one message containing the anti-corruption hotline, though the details were not ironed out. At the end of the meeting, PAS pulled GCD director aside to ask him to begin working with key TV and radio outlets to suggest they provide free air time for this public service effort. (COMMENT: This will no doubt be difficult.)

Processing the Message

¶3. (SBU) The group created about 10 "test" messages for TV and radio spots; subsequent negotiations among the Iraqi players extended the themes. Embassy is further distilling these messages, and we will provide them to IRI, which agreed to submit them to some focus groups to see how they are received by regular Iraqis. The Iraqi public affairs officials agreed at the end of the meeting to vet the messages with their ministry policy officers, while the embassy began vetting capabilities and prices of local contractors.

¶4. (SBU) Messages in hand, embassy PAS co-hosted a meeting with GCD for prospective bidders on February 8; due to extensive security procedures instituted for Ashura, only one of four companies and one of three Iraqi government officials (GCD) were able to reach the International Zone.

¶5. (SBU) The lone contractor who attended said it would take 15-20 days to produce six radio and six TV spots (30 seconds each). When asked to comment on the overall task, one of the contractor participants said that it would be very difficult to sell any message that implied fuel price increases without explaining what was happening to government income from crude oil exports. If there was clear evidence the government was easing severe hardships, the message might be credible. Another contractor participant said that no one would understand why the subsidies should be eliminated, and not the funds they all now believe are being diverted by ministries charged with spending oil revenues. No one had seen where reconstruction aid had gone; no one had seen where oil income had gone; and no one believes they will see the "savings" the government says it will realize from subsidy reductions. Nonetheless, the contractor was prepared to work with the government to further develop scenarios for the campaign. The owner of the PR company said that, given the likely extreme distaste for the message (people were absorbing higher prices for all goods after the last price hike), the campaign will have to try and create a new dynamic between government and citizen. To succeed, it will have to be an "intellectual message wrapped in an emotional package."

¶6. (SBU) Embassy is making some revisions to the technical requirements for the TV spots and intends to distribute them to all bidders in a meeting on February 12. By then, we

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expect that Ashura security precautions will have been fully dismantled, again permitting relatively free access to our meeting site.

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